



Critical Reading Ability: A Study of the Role of Proficiency, Gender and Topic Knowledge

Fatemeh Mahdavi^{1*} & Fatemeh Mokhtari²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Yazd University, Yazd, Iran

²MA in TEFL, Department of English Language and Literature, Yazd University, Yazd, Iran

Corresponding Author: Fatemeh Mahdavi¹, E-mail: fmahdavi@yazd.ac.ir

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study was to examine the relationship between learner factors and critical reading ability. The participants of the study were fifty Iranian EFL learners. They answered to a questionnaire on critical thinking ability and took a critical reading test. Their scores were compared and contrasted with regard to the three variables under investigation, namely, proficiency level, gender, and topic knowledge. The results of the study revealed that while proficiency level has a positive effect on the enhancement of critical reading ability of the learners, gender and topic knowledge do not have a significant contribution to the development of this skill. The findings suggested important implications for EFL teachers and materials developers.

1. INTRODUCTION

The role of reading ability has always been considered vital in the process of learning a second/foreign language. It is a complex cognitive activity which is very influential in gaining information in this modern era. The necessity of reading is obvious but teachers need to train the learners how to become active readers. However, most of the attention in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) reading classes has been devoted to propositional content of texts rather than to the ideological assumptions behind the texts. The present study is an attempt to investigate the critical reading ability of EFL learners.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Critical Thinking and Critical Reading

Paul (1988) defined critical thinking as "the ability to reach second conclusions based on observations and information" (p. 50). To put in another words, students learn how to ask and answer questions such as evaluation, synthesis, and analysis. According to Brookfield (1987), it is the duty of educational systems to make any attempts to "awaken, prompt, nurture and encourage the process of thinking critically and reflectively" (p.11). In similar vein, teachers can set a series of tasks, activities and the

feedbacks for students to grow critical reading abilities in them. The importance of enhancing higher order thinking skills in foreign language classroom have been emphasized by educators (e.g., Chamot, 1995; Tarvin & Al-Arishi, 1991) and empirical evidence can be supported by the effectiveness of teaching critical thinking skills in education with the foreign language (e.g., Chapple & Curtis, 2000; Davidson, 1998). According to Mahyuddin et al (2004), the language learners with critical thinking ability are able to think ritually and creatively to obtain the aims of education, able to solve problems and make decisions, able to use their thinking skills; able to treat thinking skill as constant learning.

Critical reading is a more active way of reading. It is a deeper and more complex engagement with a text. Critical reading is a process of analyzing, interpreting, and sometimes, evaluating the larger meanings of a text and how those meanings are created by the text. When we read critically, we use our critical thinking skills to question both the text and our own reading of it. Robert Kaplan believes that "text, whether written or oral, is a multidimensional structure," and any text is layered consisting of many layers (1990, p.202). The basics of a text consist of syntax and lexicon; its grammar, morphology, phonology, and semantics. However, "The understanding... of grammar and

lexicon does not constitute the understanding...of text." "Rhetoric intent....," says Kaplan, "coherence and the world view that author and receptor bring to the text are essential." (1990, p.202)

Wallace (1992) accepts that critical reading is one of many strategies available to the readers; however, it may become very efficient when learners encounter texts that contain ideological assumptions and whose interpretation depends largely on a sociocultural context. Lots of texts people read in everyday life are of this nature, the examples of which are: news reports, magazine articles, advertisements, political speeches, even some novels and short stories.

A number of explanations have been counted by Correia (2006) why reading comprehension exercises should not be used as the only kind of reading activity in the classroom. First of all, reading comprehension exercises involves passive reading in which students just have to locate the information in the text to answer to a question. Next, such tasks do not motivate students to read between the lines or question the reality and truth of the information. Next, these tasks generally refer only to parts of the text, not to the whole text. Finally, such tasks especially for young learners are neither challenging nor fun.

Since EFL learners always are confronted with new culture and foreign beliefs and thought, they transfer these ideas to their own society. They have to know the meaning embedded in text or discourses around them. Koupae Dar (2010) believes that language does not have a superficial nature, but it is a complex process and entices language users to go beyond surface level of text and leads them into a deep level of meaning and communication to challenge their mind. According to Boston (2002), many teachers already deal with critical reading in their classrooms. When students are asked to give their opinions about a text, to compare the text situation with their own situation a critical reading task is performed.

2.2. Teaching Critical Reading in ESL/EFL Context

During the past two decades critical reading has found its way to second language studies. Wallace (1992) has been among the first to bring to attention a serious gap inherently present in most EFL classes. She contends that "EFL students are often marginalized as readers; their goals in interacting with written texts are perceived to be primarily those of language learners" (p. 62). She argues that this is partly due to the prevalent practices in EFL reading classes. The fundamental focus of many educational systems is on propositional content at the expense of losing sight of the ideological assumptions that underlie texts.

Ordinary reading classes, according to her, are deficient in three principal ways: 1) an attempt to relate reading activity and texts to the broader social context, 2) the use of more provocative texts; a methodology for text interpretation that helps unfold both the propositional content and the ideological assumptions behind the text (Wallace, 1992, p. 62). The argument adequately demonstrates that reading between the lines or challenging the ideological assumptions of texts cannot be effectively achieved without teachers' scaffolding of activities and skills which would enable students to approach texts more critically.

Wallace (1992) herself accepted that many readers are not in a position to attain critical awareness of texts by themselves. More recently, believing that a sound critical approach to language study is almost absent in EFL programs, Cots (2006) recommended a complementary model for implementing critical reading techniques in EFL classes. He found that that his model is in harmony with "a view of education which prioritizes the development of the learners' capacities to analyse and judge the world carefully" (p. 336). Certainly, teachers most often choose for practicing reading skills texts that present functional survival or general interest material of a safe nature and the main reading tasks are analyzing linguistic structure or new vocabulary items. During interaction with such texts readers take up a rather submissive position. Critical reading approach is trying to change this situation by offering students clues how to become more assertive and more confident readers.

In Cots's (2006) study, critical reading techniques were used in a foreign language class. Students needed to develop simultaneously three types of competence: user, analyst, and teacher. They also should do three types of activities designed based on Fairclough analytical framework. In his study Cots (2006) wanted to demonstrate that choices of the teachers or materials developers in text selection could be critically analyzed. Teachers and learners could do such an analysis together in the classroom. Cots's (2006) goal in his study was to present critical reading as a complementary model for analyzing language use and for designing language learning activities.

In Correia's (2006) study, the students' feedback revealed that in spite of their fluency in L1 and L2, they tended to accept printed material without questioning the honesty or bias of the text. Students also said that they considered themselves critical readers in their first language. However, when reading EFL texts, they felt they needed help to come up with reading between the lines. Correia (2006) believes although developing critical reading skills can be time-

consuming and difficult for EFL students but as working with texts in EFL reading classes in this way should help EFL readers feel they have options in the way they choose to read the text and to help them feel in a more equal relationship with the writer.

In the other study by IÇMEZ (2009) critical reading practices were adapted to traditional EFL reading lessons to increase students' motivations. Critical reading assessment procedures, which involve asking the students to decide on the texts for analysis and encouraging them to express their positions related to the texts analyzed, result in an increase in students' motivations. According to the results of his study, relating the learning experience to the students' own realities, which affects text selection, student involvement and classroom communication develops critical reading ability of the learners.

In a study conducted by Zingraf (2003), methods of critical reading were used by non-native speakers of English to analyze texts. In this study, university students started increasing their critical language awareness and a change in their attitude toward texts extracted from the British press. The skills and strategies that the students practiced during their reading course involved, among others, critical reaction to texts that could serve as those presenting writers' ideological views and manipulating readers by the use of certain textual features.

In order to get a sense of how critical reading works the students first exercised critical reading of advertisements where the power of language heavily influences readers' perception of the text and the world. In addition, they chose longer magazine articles of topics that were interesting for them. Broadly speaking, it was texts from the press that were analysed most often during their critical reading classes.

Huckin (1998) devised and implemented a critical reading model. Before taking up critical reading strategies for text analysis the students were asked to read the text as typical readers. Having this typical reader in mind, they practiced a second, more critical reading with the use of factors suggested by Huckin (1997). They mostly worked in groups, each of which had a few factors to analyse and to present the outcome of their analysis to the whole class. That part was usually followed by a discussion on what role social context plays in text interpretation and readers' personal understanding of the text and its writer's ideology. The students realized that texts can have more than one meaning. Moreover; they became more interested in the circumstances of text production as

well as in its political, social and cultural background. They also noticed that the language and presentation of facts differed with regard to in which newspaper the texts were published. Most of the students implemented a fairly detailed and careful analysis of the texts. At the end of the academic term, the students were asked to comment on the idea of introducing the critical reading project as a part of developing their foreign language reading skills. Out of thirteen students, eleven found the activity very interesting, and stated that the project contributed to improving their reading skills. The findings of this study revealed that students can be equipped with the necessary critical tools in order not to be manipulated with texts loaded with bias.

Zingraf (2003) believes the view of texts as "vehicles for linguistic structure" is the way texts are presented to foreign language learners. Zingraf (2003) states owing to unawareness of the ideological load of certain expressions or words in authentic second language texts, and as a result of unawareness of their manipulative effect on the readers' beliefs, EFL university learners do not question anything of the foreign language.

With the purpose of enticing learners to approach the text critically and detect the ideological assumption of text, teachers can support learners with some skills and scaffolding of activity. Moreover, an EFL teacher can employ critical discourse analysis techniques and asks students to analyse discourse and find the hidden meaning and explore the association between discourse, ideology, and power. Because of this activity, instructor can motivate learners toward a lifelong ability in critical thinking (Luke, 2003).

Few studies have been conducted to examine the way learner factors enhance critical reading ability of the learners in Iranian EFL context. Thus, the present study attempts to concentrate on critical reading ability of these learners and investigate some learner factors which contribute to the development of this skill.

3. METHOD

3.1 Research Questions

The research questions addressed in the present study are:

- 1- What is the relationship between general language proficiency of the learners and critical reading skill?
- 2- What is the relationship between gender of the language learners and critical reading skill?
- 3- What is the relationship between topic knowledge and critical reading skill?

3.2 Participants and Setting

Fifty sophomore students majoring in English translation took part in this research, twenty seven female and twenty three male. Their ages were between 18-24. The participants had already passed the courses on reading political texts and reading newspapers. Therefore, they were assumed to be familiar with the characteristic of the political texts. They were classified according to three variables, namely, their English language proficiency, gender, and topic knowledge.

3.3. Instruments and Procedure

3.3.1 Oxford Placement Test (OPT)

At the beginning of the research, a total number of the participants were required to take OPT to make sure that they were homogeneous with respect to their proficiency in language skills as a whole. The questions of the test were taken from 'Oxford University Press and University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate' by Fischer (2001). The OPT was administered to categorize participants into the higher and lower levels of English proficiency. OPT consists of 60 multiple-choice items. The allotted time to the participants to answer the questions was 30 minutes. According to the results of the test shown in Table 1, all the participants were assigned into two different levels of proficiency.

Table 1. The tank of English language proficiency knowledge

Lower	Upper Intermediate
Intermediate (30-39)	(40-47)

3.3.2 Questionnaire

In addition to the mentioned test, a questionnaire was designed by the researchers in order to examine the knowledge of the participants about critical reading as well (Appendix 1). This questionnaire consists of 24 items. Cronbach's alpha statistics was used to estimate the reliability of the questionnaire and the reliability coefficient was %78, it shows that there is a high consistency between the items. In order to increase the validity of this instrument, three experienced experts in the realm of Media, Political sciences and Critical Reading considered the content of the items and selected 24 items from among the 35 items of the first draft. The items were attitudinal questions used to find out what the participants think, covering attitudes, opinions, beliefs, interests and values. The participants were required to choose one of the choices and mark in the answer sheet. Those students who answered to fifty percent and more were classified as those that have high topical knowledge, and those students who answered to less than fifty percent were classified as those who have low topical knowledge.

3.3.3 Critical Reading Comprehension Test (CRCT)

Although the participants were able to read by themselves, they were again under examination to see if they were able to make a bridge between passive reading and active reading and if they were able to read between the lines or not. In this phase, all the participants took part in a CRCT that was developed by the researchers (Appendix 2). In order to meet the research goal, the researchers focused on the analysed parts in the descriptive phase then selected some of them and designed about fifty open-ended questions. After consulting with two experts in the field of reading to increase the validity of the items, modifications were made and the final version of the test was made of 13 parts and 23 questions.

The participants' answers to the critical reading comprehension test were scored by two raters in order to apply inter-rater reliability. The statistical measure of interrater reliability is Cohen's Kappa which ranges generally from 0 to 1.0 where large numbers mean better reliability, values near or less than zero suggest that agreement is attributable to chance alone. In the present study, the results of the inter-rater analysis were Kappa = 0.676 with $p < 0.001$. As it is indicated, the value shows a high degree of correlation in the test results between the two raters. As a rule of thumb values of Kappa in the range of 0.61 – 0/80 are considered moderate. So, it can be concluded that the scoring process was reliable.

4. RESULTS

The study concentrated on the relationship between critical reading ability of Iranian EFL learners and their proficiency level, gender and topical knowledge. The following results were obtained.

4.1. The Relationship between the Language Proficiency and Critical Reading

To ensure the homogeneity of the participants, all the participants of this study took part in the Oxford University's Quick placement test and were classified according their scores to two groups, higher intermediate level and lower intermediate level. In order to find the answer of the first research question, twenty male participants were selected and divided into two groups. It merits mentioning that all of them answered to fifty percent or more of the questions of the questionnaire. Table 2 shows the frequency of the first group.

Table 2. The frequency of the participants for the first research question

	Language proficiency knowledge	Number
Group1(Male)	High level	9
Group 2(Male)	Low level	11

In order to analyze the performance of the participants on the critical reading test, an independent t-test was used. Inferential statistics including means and standard deviation of the both groups participating in the test administrated for the second research question are given in the Table 3.

Table 3. Group Statistics for the first research question

Group	Number	Mean	SD
Group1	9	2/76	%87
Group2	11	2/59	%55

A comparison was made between the means of the two groups to see whether or not the level of language proficiency knowledge results in higher scores in critical reading test. The level of significance chosen is %000. According to the obtained results in Table 4 and Figure 1, it can be concluded that there is a meaningful difference between proficiency knowledge and critical reading, so the directional hypothesis is accepted and thus it can be an indication that language proficiency plays a significant role in improving the critical reading ability of the learners.

Table 4. Independent Sample Test for the first research question

T	Sig.(2-tailed)
1/498	%000

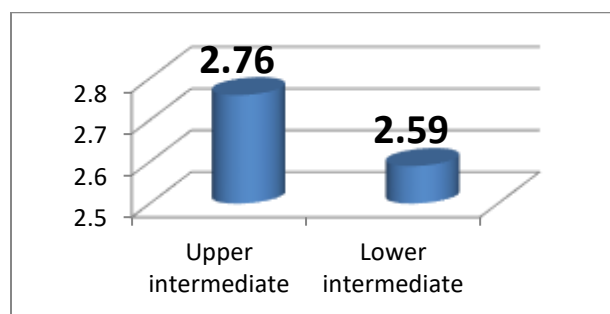


Figure 1. The relationship between the language proficiency knowledge and critical reading

4.2. The Relationship between Gender and Critical Reading

In order to find the answer of the second research question, all the participants who were classified as the learners with high level of topical knowledge and high level of proficiency knowledge were selected, and then they were divided into two groups, male and female. Table 5 shows the frequency of the participants in the subgroups.

Table 5. The frequency of the participants for the second research question

	Topical knowledge	Language proficiency	Number
Male	High level	High level	14
Female	High level	High level	16

In order to analyze the performance of the participants on the critical reading test, an independent t-test was used. Inferential statistics including means and standard deviation of the both groups are given in Table 6.

Table 6. Group statistics for the second research questions

Group	Number	Mean	SD
Group1(Male)	14	2/47	%76
Group2(Female)	16	2/52	%34

A comparison was made between the means of the two groups to see whether or not gender affects the scores in critical reading test. The level of significance chosen is %105. According to obtained results that is shown in Table 7 and Figure 2, it can be concluded that there is not a meaningful difference between gender and critical reading.

Table 7. Independent Sample Test for the second research question

t	Sig.(2-tailed)
-%765	%105

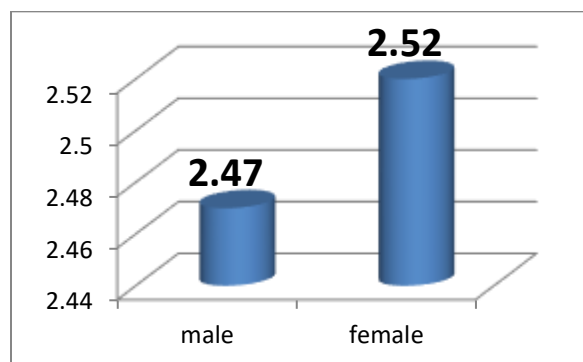


Figure 2. The relationship between the gender and critical reading

4.3. The Relationship Between the Topic Knowledge and Critical Reading

In order to find answer to the third research question, those participants who were female and had the same level of language proficiency knowledge were selected and divided into two groups. The frequency of the participants of the subgroups for this comparison is shown in Table 8.

Table 8. The frequency of the participants for the third research question

	Topic knowledge	Language proficiency	Number
Group1(Female)	High level	High level	9
Group 2(Female)	Low level	High level	6

In order to analyze the performance of the participants on the critical reading test, an independent t-test was used. Inferential statistics including means and standard deviation of the both subgroups are given in Table 9.

Table 9. Group statistics for the third research question

Group	Number	Mean	SD
Group1	9	2/37	%66
Group2	6	2/44	%48

A comparison was made between the means of the two groups to see whether or not topic knowledge results in higher scores in critical reading test. The level of significance chosen is %198. According to obtained results portrayed in Table 10 and Figure 3 it can be concluded that there is not a meaningful difference between the performance of the participants with different topic knowledge level and critical reading.

Table 10. Independent Sample Test for the third research question

T	Sig.(2-tailed)
-.987	%198

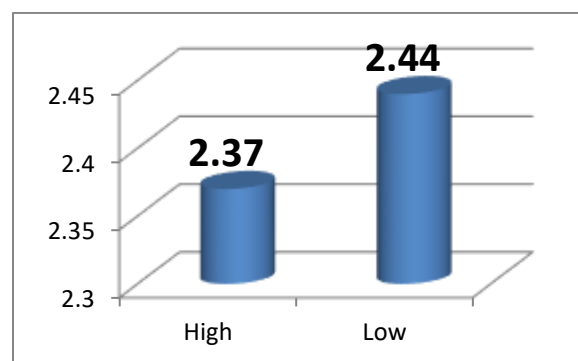


Figure 3. The relationship between the topic knowledge and critical reading

5. Discussion, Conclusions and Implications

In general, the overall purpose of the study was to examine whether learner factors could play any role for enhancing critical reading ability. The participants were selected and classified into three groups according to the variables of language proficiency knowledge, gender and topical knowledge. The results obtained from the study manifests that those participants who had high level of proficiency knowledge analysed the texts better than those participants who had low level of language proficiency knowledge. It can be concluded that the improvement of the linguistic competence is paramount for those learners who want to grasp the intended meanings and hidden ideologies of a text. The findings related to the participants' gender show that the difference between the performance of the males and females is not meaningful, and the level of critical reading is the same in two groups. Moreover, it was found that a higher level of topic knowledge does not lead to a significantly better performance in the critical reading test.

The above results show that more proficient learners have a greater ability in reading the text critically and that other variable such as gender and topical knowledge do not have a significant contribution to critical reading skill. In other words, the development of language competence enhances the critical thinking abilities of the learners, too. This means that students can be equipped with the knowledge of questioning and evaluating the ideas residing in the texts while expanding their general proficiency knowledge. Language learning activities can be devised for ESL/EFL learners in order to help them to attain critical awareness. As Correia (2006) puts it, the

learners should learn not to accept the printed materials without questioning the honesty or bias of the text. Therefore, As Zingraf (2003) indicates, learners should be equipped with the necessary critical tools in order not to be manipulated with texts loaded with bias. In other words, the need for involving a critical approach to language learning programs that is consistent with a view of education which prioritizes the development of the learners' capacities to examine and judge the world carefully and, if necessary, to change it seem.

According to Brown (2004), teachers are at the helm of giving students' favorable time to learn regarding consequential issues of moral and social to analyse different aspects of an issue. Furthermore, textbook designers who are active in the domain of English for Specific Purposes, need to consider language use as one of the crucial social practices influenced by power and ideology and to be aware about certain discourse categories of these genres and consequently design the ideologically motivated materials that can be used to encourage the learners to look at the world critically and do not accept everything at first glance. Moreover, the enhancement of this ability makes readers perceptive to judgmental prejudiced discourse and prompts them to act against injustice and incommensurate distribution of power.

Further research can be conducted to elaborate on the role of variables other than the ones investigated in the present study.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Fatemeh Mahdavi is an assistant professor at Yazd University, Iran. Her research interests include critical discourse analysis, task-based language teaching, discourse analysis, and SLA research.

Fatemeh Mokhtari received her MA in TEFL from Yazd University. Her areas of interest are teaching language skills, critical discourse analysis, and discourse analysis.

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Appendix 1

Critical Reading Comprehension Questionnaire

Instruction: Please read the questions and mark your answers.

- 1- When you read any subject, are you confident that the writer's opinion is right and do you speculate about it in no way?
a) Agree b) Disagree c) Not Decided
2. When you read any subject, is your mind involved in it and you do not accept it promptly?
a) Agree b) Disagree c) Not Decided
3. When you read any subject, do you ask yourself about its accuracy?
a) Agree b) Disagree c) Not Decided
4. When you read any subject do you ask yourself, are you are in favor of or against it and do you like it or not?
a) Agree b) Disagree c) Not Decided
5. Do you believe that you understand a subject with reading it once and there is no need to read it once more?
a) Agree b) Disagree c) Not Decided
6. Do you believe that there is a necessity for educational system to improve our reading skills?
a) Agree b) Disagree c) Not Decided
7. In your opinion, is it possible to take advantage of language to make social and political power?
a) Agree b) Disagree c) Not Decided
8. Considering and Studying the new issues is interesting and amazing in your life?
a) Agree b) Disagree c) Not Decided
9. Do facts depend on your ideas always?
a) Agree b) Disagree c) Not Decided
10. Is it true that you cannot realize the whole truth about a variety of subjects?
a) Agree b) Disagree c) Not Decided
11. Are some of the questions that more valuable and useful because you are forced to use your thought rather than your memory?
a) Agree b) Disagree c) Not Decided
12. After reading any subject, regardless of your ideas do you accept any claim that the writer has stated?
a) Agree b) Disagree c) Not Decided
13. Is it important for you to know the people's ideas about different subjects?
a) Agree b) Disagree c) Not Decided
14. Most of the time, do you appraise and assess other people's opinions?
a) Agree b) Disagree c) Not Decided

15. Do you try to support your opinions and ideas by reasoning and providing justification?
a) Agree b) Disagree c) Not Decided
16. Do you try to increase the level of your knowledge about challenging issues or subjects?
a) Agree b) Disagree c) Not Decided
17. In your opinion, is it enjoyable and exciting to read other people's opinions across the world?
a) Agree b) Disagree c) Not Decided
18. Do you pursue more about facts which confirm your opinions rather than disagree with them?
a) Agree b) Disagree c) Not Decided
19. Do you enjoy trying to find out about the mechanism of phenomena?
a) Agree b) Disagree c) Not Decided
20. In your opinion, asking other people about the solutions is the best way to deal with the problems and difficulties?
a) Agree b) Disagree c) Not Decided
21. In your opinion, isn't it true to ask some of the questions?
a) Agree b) Disagree c) Not Decided
22. Is the reality what is showed, displayed and demonstrated?
a) Agree b) Disagree c) Not Decided
23. Do you speculate about what you read?
a) Agree b) Disagree c) Not Decided
24. Do you think about the writer, publication company and place of what you are read?
a) Agree b) Disagree c) Not Decided

Appendix 2

Critical Reading Comprehension Test

Instruction: Please read the following extracts of the news on Syria crisis and answer the questions in your own words.

Part1

The judicious policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in fact, ensures peace and security in the region.

- 1- Is the writer in favor or against the policy of Iran?

Part2

Syria and its nation are on the Resistance Axis against the Zionist Regime.

- 2- Do Syria and its nation like to fight deliberately with Zionist Regime? Explain.

Part3

Iran has always been the most influential country in the Middle East since the beginning, as regional rivals and analysts admit.

- 3- What do you think about the publication place of above excerpted news?

- 4- What does the writer convey about Iran?

Part4

Over the past two years, what began as a series of protests against the regime of Bashar al- Assad has turned into a brutal civil war.

5- Does the writer confirm Bashar al- Assad as an accepted president?

6- What are the supporting points that create the argument?

Part5

Settlement of the Syrian crisis needs Iran's constructive role.

7- What is the writer's perspective about the role of the other countries other than Iran?

8- What is his appraisal of the role of Iran?

Part6

We do not forget what Syria did for us during the Imposed War of Iraq against Iran. Thus, the Iranian nation sees itself beside the Syrian nation in time of hardship today.

9- Does the writer consider the current situation in Syria as a disaster?

10- Does the nation of Iran is in line with the policies of the government about the Syria crisis?

Part7

In that time, America has worked with allies to provide support, to help the moderate opposition, and to shape a political settlement.

11- Whose perspective does the author admit about America?

12- Does America want to prolong the Crisis of Syria?

Part8

As we know Syria is one of the first places that remained a commercial crossroads, and contributed to a rich cultural mix of ethnicities, customs, and creeds, but the story of modern Syria has been a grim one.

13- Is there a difference between Old Syria and Modern Syria? How can you support your argument?

14- Is the writer worried about the Syria Crisis?

Part9

Assad was succeeded by his son, Bashar, raising hopes for the possibility of greater political openness- hopes that the new leader chose not to fulfill.

15- What is the tone of the text? Is something alarming? Happy? Factual?

16- Does the writer represent Bashar- al Assad as a president who ascertains the wishes of people?

Part10

The two brother countries, Iran and Syria, in addition to shared religious and cultural backgrounds, have deep roots in history, culture, and human civilization.

17- Who is the likely reader of the above news?

18- What emphasis is placed on people in the text?

Part11

When the sparks of Arab Spring began to ignite, a twenty Syrian has been wounded or killed; a Syrian in five is a refugee and a Syrian in two has been displaced; therefore there is a need to move simultaneously toward a political solution to the civil war that paves the way for a new government with new leadership.

19- Does the writer of the text concern a specific group?

20- Why does he want to show his concern?

21- Does the writer imply that Bashar- al Assad can make a promising future for the Syria?

Part12

The foreign movements on the Syrian crisis are divided into two different groups: peace-seekers, including Iran and Russia, and warmongers, including the West, Turkey, Zionists and some regressive Arab countries

22- Why does the writer emphasize on the positive characteristic of countries like Iran?

Part13

The Syrian nation has an increasingly strong will to confront the US and Zionists' conspiracy in the region...the government, army, and nation of Syria are united and have proved their steadfastness so far.

23- Does the writer confirm the legitimacy of Syrian government?